
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Please check your sitting posture and, most importantly, ensure that you sit comfortably and that you feel relaxed in your body.

In meditation, what we should expect is to bring calmness to the mind, and then through this, to bring about some clarity within the mind and also increase our level of concentration so that the mind will rest, and just sit where it is supposed to be.

When we engage in meditation practice, we are trying to impose some kind of discipline or training on our mind. In the same way as it is important for us to have some sort of discipline in our mundane life, as there are some rules which we should abide by. Similarly, in meditation practice, through applying some kind of discipline or rule, we are able to change or modify our mind in a way that we would prefer.

We also say that meditation practice is to familiarise our mind with a positive mental attitude, or in other words cultivate a positive state of mind. Therefore, it is a very useful training for the mind. So, as we train our mind, and if we are successful in familiarising our mind with a positive way of thinking or mental attitude, then we will really gain some benefit out of that.

The reason that we gain such benefit is because when we look into our life experiences, we can observe that sometimes the source, or root, or main cause of our problems is not something that is external. Rather it is really our mind which brings about all these unnecessary troubles and confusion, stress, anxiety, tension and so forth.

Therefore, in order to get rid of such troubling disturbing states of mind which may result in unhappiness, we need to cultivate positive states of mind, which will bring more happiness, peace and clarity within our mind. If you ask whether it is possible to bring about such transformation within our minds, then we have to say, 'yes, it is possible', and there is a reason for that.

If we observe our usual ordinary state of mind, which lacks any disciplines or rules, it has the tendency to be easily distracted. For instance, if the object it encounters is beautiful, we can easily become attached to it and even become obsessed with it. And we know from our own experience, how such obsession can become a bit like a mental sickness, something that can be very difficult to overcome, and how, for as long as that exists, we cannot really enjoy our life.

In a sense, our mind can become very familiar with obsessive or desirous emotions. When the mind becomes familiar with an obsessive desire, then that desire is either

within us all the time, or it only takes a tiny cause or factor for it to arise within us. Even if we try to forget that mind we cannot, and this is because our mind is too familiar with that emotion.

At the same time, if we look within us we will find that just as there are some emotions that we find disturbing, undesirable and destructive, there are other states of mind which can bring very positive, wholesome and pleasant experiences to our life. These positive states of mind have the effect of bringing inner peace, calmness, clear thinking and positive feelings and so forth.

With meditation practice, we are trying to become familiar with those positive states of mind that we can identify within ourselves. At the moment the force of those positive states of mind is very weak and we don't experience them very often because of our greater familiarity with negative states of mind, but at least we can see the great benefit for ourselves if we have more of those positive states of mind and greater familiarity with them.

Another aspect of meditation practice is, as I always say, that it helps us to safeguard internal causes or factors for our happiness. And if we could maintain that internal happiness, then even if we confront some adverse external situations or conditions, we have the ability to resist them, and thereby maintain our mental peace, sanity and clear thinking.

However, if we lose the internal cause or factor of happiness, it only takes a very minor external condition to put us into a very unhappy situation. In this way, if we closely examine our state of mind, and then we can see the necessity for us to have some control over our thoughts, and some sort of mental discipline.

As we consider the means of disciplining or training our mind, we will find that the only effective means is meditation practice. Therefore, we need to understand the benefits of meditation practice and how to do it so that we will be motivated to engage in that practice. We can talk about the benefits of meditation from different angles: the benefits for making progress in the spiritual path, and the benefits in our everyday life. The overall benefit is to make whatever we do, whether it is mundane activities or spiritual practices, more effective in achieving our intended results.

Think of how finding enjoyment in even small things like drinking a cup of tea or eating food has a lot to do with our mind being with us at that moment. If your mind is preoccupied with something else or wandering somewhere else while you are eating, and when you finish eating and somebody asks you 'how was your meal', you'd probably reply, 'yeah, it was great'. But if he asks what you had, you might have to think again, and maybe you won't remember. That means that you didn't enjoy the taste of food because your mind was not there with you while you were eating. In the same way if our mind is preoccupied or very distracted in our everyday life, then whatever action or work we do will be very ineffective.

The meditation practice enables us to familiarise our mind with a virtuous object. It helps us to increase the

concentration of our mind so that we have more command over our mind, and it becomes more loyal to us; if we want the mind to focus on certain objects, it can and will, even on a single object without being distracted by any other objects. Whereas at the moment, because we do not pay attention to observing the mind, and do not make an effort to discipline our mind to sit on a chosen object, our mind is all over the place all the time. Our normal mind has an inbuilt negative habit of always being distracted, wandering off to various objects. We are doing something, or we are somewhere but our mind is doing something else and is somewhere else. If we go to where the mind is, it goes somewhere else, and when we go there, again it is not there. As a result of our mind being always scattered and agitated, we find that our concentration is very weak in whatever we do, thus rendering our action ineffective or weak in producing a result.

Sometimes when we have a very disturbed state of mind, we are overwhelmed with a lot of stress to the point that we cannot enjoy life no matter what we do. Under that circumstance, if we examine the cause of our difficulty we can clearly recognise that it is directly related to our state of mind. However, if we try to get rid of that mind, it is not an easy task for us at all, which shows up our inability to control or discipline the mind.

We can gain control over our mind if we engage in meditation on a regular basis, if we take the meditation practice seriously, and engage in it with a proper understanding. Meditation practice helps us not only to stop our mind from racing after things and to find a moment of stillness and relaxation, but it also enables us to increase concentration, clear thinking and so forth. Having gained some meditational experience in controlling the mind, then we will find that we are in a much better position to recognise any disturbed states of mind and effectively overrule them.

If the meditation practice is just a matter of someone guiding you to close your eyes and just relax, then the practice is easy. However there is a lot more to meditation practice than just that. It has the long-term benefit of developing a greater understanding of our mind. The practice entails directing your whole attention inside yourself within your mind, and to recognise that there is another dimension of yourself and your world there, and how, in fact, your experience of happiness and suffering derives from there.

When you are not happy or in bad mood, for example when there is something bothering or disturbing you deeply, then you easily react to any unfavourable external situations that you confront. Sometimes even if it is not caused by another person such as your friends or partners, you will easily blame them and react by doing something to hurt their feelings.

It is therefore important that we see the meditation practice as something that enables us to develop more understanding of our mind, and how there are favourable or unfavourable factors within ourselves that result in benefits and harm to ourselves. The purpose of meditation practice is also to clearly recognise the source of happiness or suffering. Hence meditation or spiritual

practice, is, in simple terms, a method to adopt the things which bring benefit to us and others and reject those things which bring harm to us and others.

We will do some breathing meditation together soon, where direct our mental attention onto inhaling and exhaling as we breathe. It is really very important that our whole attention or concentration is on the breath, and in that way our whole mental energy is also directed there. As we discussed earlier, the kind of mind we normally utilise is lacking concentration because it is always very scattered, all over the place, and sometimes it even makes us feel very weak or lacking energy and self-esteem. However, it is not that we do not have enough potential and energy, rather we feel that way because our mind is very distracted and scattered.

In meditation practice, as part of training the mind, we direct all our attention onto one single object, which is also like directing all our energy, potential or the force of the mind onto just the meditation object. Therefore, the more meditation practice we do, the more we become familiar with directing our mind on a single object and the better we will become at directing our mental attention onto whatever we are doing, or onto any object, or subject that we want the mind to focus on.

So now we will begin a very short breathing meditation and make every effort to try to keep the mind simply on the incoming and outgoing breath, and as much as possible try to prevent any mental distractions in this meditation.

Pause for meditation

We will now continue the meditation, but we will change the focus to the sound of the Buddha mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNIYE SOHA.

Does anyone have a question?

Question: Has the Buddha got an omnipotent mind?

The Buddha, in his lifetime, achieved and mastered various sciences of knowledge such as art, medicine, poetry, language and so forth, and many of the things the Buddha said and predicted have now been found to be true. During his time the world didn't have all the modern equipment that enables people to see subtle objects. Yet there are some scriptures where the Buddha revealed some subtle things. In the sutra called *Entering into the Womb* he clearly explained the development of humans from the early foetal stages and so forth. How could the Buddha know these things if he didn't have an omniscient mind. I can say that the Buddha is omnipotent, but this doesn't mean that there is end to the suffering in the world.

If we want to be free from suffering, then we have to follow the example of how Lord Buddha lived his life. He was also once like us, experiencing suffering like us. He achieved the supreme liberation by cherishing other beings, whereas we are still caught in the suffering world because we still have self-cherishing. We need to remember that the state of enlightenment that the Buddha achieved was the outcome of his long, hard work, and struggles on the path. In fact, in part of his teachings, he said, 'I cannot wash away the sufferings of

living beings with water, nor can I pull their suffering out with my hands or transfer my realisations to others. But I liberate sentient beings by showing them the truth'. So each being has to make an effort, and create the cause for achieving the state of buddhahood in the same way as Lord Buddha did.

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When sentient beings experience happiness or suffering, each individual being has to go through that – they cannot share or give their happiness or suffering directly to others. If this were possible then I would want to share some of my happiness with you, but unfortunately I can't, even though I wish I could.

Let me tell you this. Once, outside a shop I met an elderly woman on a walking frame who said to me, 'you have got a nice smile and look happy'. At that time, I would have immediately shared my happiness with her if I could, but I couldn't. So, feelings of happiness and suffering are not like material possessions which we can give to others or get rid of easily.

Let's say there is a family of four or five people living together and everybody is happy except for one person who is really unhappy and sad. The other four can't do much to immediately make them happy. The Lord Buddha said that each individual creates the causes for their own happiness and suffering.

There are some people who have commented to me that the reason why I look calm and happy may have something to do with my educational background. Maybe that is possible, maybe my feelings and experiences are an outer expression of my Dharma knowledge of the Buddha's scriptures.

On another occasion I met this lady at the St Kilda Bath. She told me she had seen me over the last two years, and said to me 'There is something in you that is very inspiring for my life', and she asked, 'Are you a Buddhist monk?' I replied, 'Yes, I am'. Then she said, 'I will be happy if I become like you' and then she said that she would look for a meditation centre. Eventually she found one and has been going there. So maybe what this says is that it is possible to be a source of inspiration for others, and in some way and other you may be able to make other people happy. I have a lot of interaction with various people and talked with them about experiences in life. One person said to me, 'Geshe-la, you looked happy and peaceful when I saw you years ago and you are still the same.'

Essentially what I am trying to say is how important it is to maintain peace and happiness within your mind. In that way, not only do you experience your life as very peaceful and happy, but you are also contributing a sense of peace and happiness to other people and to those around you.

Thank you for paying very good attention to the teaching.